

Books

Essay

Getting a Read on Independent Schools

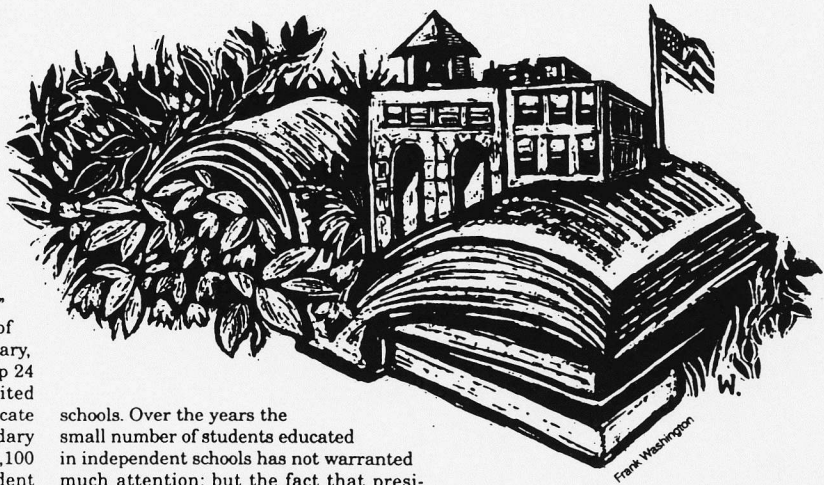
By Dane L. Peters

Having been raised in public education through college, I first began to understand private schools through books. J.D. Salinger's Pencey Prep in *Catcher in the Rye* and John Knowles' Devon School in *A Separate Peace* opened my eyes to what would eventually become the locus of my career. I did not know then that "private school" could mean 15 different categories of schools—parochial, independent, military, alternative, and so on—which make up 24 percent of all the schools in the United States. Of the 111,000 schools that educate over 51 million elementary and secondary school children in this country, only 26,100 are private schools. It is the independent schools, which today include 1,100 schools educating some 500,000 students, that J.D. Salinger and John Knowles portrayed in their novels.

After I received my teaching certification and was given my first teaching assignment in an independent school, I began to compare what I had read with what was now apparent fact. Immediately, I wanted to read more about the mystique and lore of the early beginnings of American independent schools—then more commonly referred to as private schools or preparatory ("prep") schools. One book stands out in my mind: Louis Auchincloss' *The Rector of Justin*. Much like John McPhee's *Headmaster: Frank Boyden of Deerfield*, the private school in *The Rector of Justin* was an institution cloaked in privilege, college-like teaching, and teachers devoting a lifetime to one school. It was difficult to distinguish between what were British customs and what were American innovations in these schools, since independent schools have always had their roots firmly planted in English soil.

Eventually, John Irving caught my attention (as well as many other readers') with his autobiographical works of fiction: *The World According to Garp* and, subsequently, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, in which the fictional Gravesend Academy was the backdrop for Mr. Irving's early life as Owen Meany. Even more successful in catching the public's attention was the movie version of the first novel, 1982's *The World According to Garp*, as well as other films about independent schools: *Dead Poets Society* in 1989, *School Ties* in 1992, and *Scent of a Woman*, which won the 1992 Best Actor Oscar for Al Pacino.

Now, as an educator with a 25-year career in independent schools and as a father of independent school graduates, my reading about the world in which I work includes both fiction and nonfiction. Some works are quite accurate, while others leave too much to the imagination and make it difficult for the majority of parents or college graduates ever to consider either an education or a career in independent



schools. Over the years the small number of students educated in independent schools has not warranted much attention; but the fact that presidents and famous and wealthy people have been educated in these schools has given independent education a reputation for being elite and exclusive.

It is important to note that a major shift in independent school education from exclusive to inclusive began in the early 1980s. Partly generational, partly the squeeze of a beleaguered economy, partly a new leadership, and partly a desire to use financial aid for the benefit of both the scholarship student and the full-pay student—all these reasons caused independent schools to open their minds, ideology, and doors to a more diverse population—diverse in religion, race, gender, and socioeconomic background. With millions of dollars in financial aid and a new attitude, independent schools now vie for who can be the most diverse, and they all want to educate children whose parents value the best that education has to offer.

Initial attempts to diversify independent schools were depicted in two important books: *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry* by Robert Sam Anson, and *Black Ice* by Loren Carey. They both describe the early efforts of programs like A Better Chance and Prep for Prep, which attempt to give disadvantaged children an opportunity to take advantage of independent education. But a comparison of these two books can be likened to comparing commercial-radio news to National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." The former, a story of one talented and ambitious minority student's rise and fall, is written to attract interest and entertain. The latter, an African-American girl's personal story, represents a more accurate account of the social and economic attempts to integrate independent schools.

Of course, independent education has its skeptics. The *Harvard Independent Insiders Guide to Prep Schools* and Louis Crosier's *Casualties of Privilege: Essays on Prep Schools' Hidden Culture* are suspicious of independent school methodology. Digging and probing into residual class distinctions, financial demands, and an inherent competitive nature, Mr. Crosier attempts to perpetuate the pre-1980 stereotypes these

schools long have tried to shed. At the same time, the Klingenstein Center, based at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, dedicates much of its work to promoting and understanding independent education. Through research, programs, and education, Pearl R. Kane, the center's director, devotes available resources to helping educators better understand public and private education by finding what is common to both. Her book, *Independent Schools, Independent Thinkers*, expounds the merits of and clear thinking offered in an independent school education.

Recently, I had the occasion to introduce Arthur Powell, the author of *Lessons From Privilege*, at a conference. His ideas and his book focus on independent education and paint an accurate picture of where independent schools are today. It was the Powell book, in fact, that originally caused me to reflect on the fictional and nonfiction depictions that have been written about independent schools. In addition to conferring with colleagues, my source for exploring these books was the Internet, particularly www.amazon.com, one of two vast bookstores on the Net. Doing a search on "private schools" or "prep schools" or "independent schools" brought me the titles of hundreds of books and allowed me to consider both what I have read and what I might like to read.

Reflecting on my own public school education and my long independent school career, I wonder what will be in store for the next generation of students. Choice in education looms and constantly begs to be looked at, and setting priorities for the educational future of the new generation must be accomplished with the child in mind, not from accountability of systems and teachers. Education requires all of us to read more about the past, so that we can form the future. It is in the best interests both of those of us who are educators and those whom we educate—our children. ■

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